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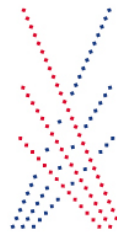


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How Digital Learning Processes Meet The Ever Changing Needs Of The Policing Profession? Enablers And Barriers In Its Application

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Summary/abstract

This is a developmental paper discussing the topic of professional development through digital learning in the context of education and training of public servants. The fieldwork is undertaken with policing organizations, more specifically territorial forces in England and Wales and their national body for professional development. In particular, this empirical study explores the current application of digital learning in the police service across England and Wales and considers how digital learning processes meet the ever-changing needs of the policing profession in order to identify enablers and barriers in its application. The paper contributes to gaining new insights on digital learning in the context of public service organizations. This research raises awareness into the challenges faced by the police in managing digital learning design and implementation to meet the changing demands of the policing service. The findings of this research can be applied in other workplace contexts where organisations require professionals to get upskilled through digital learning.

Following the global economic crisis in 2008, public services have been significantly hit by austerity in the UK with police having to do ‘more with less’ (Kiefer et al. 2015). At the same time, there is an expansion in societal needs and expectations, with changing crimes and vulnerabilities (Hartley et al. 2017). There is recognition of the increasing pressures on policing according to the National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC) in their outline of Policing Vision 2025. Globalisation accelerates and presents new challenges, the nature of crime changes resulting in a rise in the complexity of the police task for which the police workforce need to be equipped with the skills and capabilities necessary for policing (Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and National Police Chiefs’ Council 2016). Therefore, police officers and staff require new skills and capabilities to respond to these needs. By 2025 police in England and Wales envisions to be a profession, in the sense of having a body of knowledge based on evidence, and educational qualifications for the profession, with a more diverse workforce that will possess appropriate skills, powers and experience to meet challenging requirements. One way to support the learning and development of the policing workforce for current and future challenges is through the enhance application of digital learning solutions.

The proliferation of new technologies has encouraged police organizations to respond to the new opportunities in learning and development and to offer digital learning or e-learning tailored to the policing context. E-learning is also seen as a way to cut cost and provide training to a bigger number of the policing workforce (i.e. officers and staff) at their convenience (Osborne 2017). The shortage of officers limits them to leave their posts for Continuous Learning and Development programs and therefore e-learning can be seen as a solution for fewer abstractions from operational duties (Osborne 2017). Moreover, there is increased complexity of policing services and responsibilities due to rapid technological changes (Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and National Police Chiefs’ Council 2016). Therefore, there are heightened expectations for improved quality of policing services, in part through digital skills and digital learning.

This empirical study aimed to explore the current application of digital learning in the police service across England and Wales and considered how digital learning processes meet the ever-changing needs of the policing profession in order to identify enablers and barriers in its application. This study is part of a larger study that is examining learning and development (L&D) transformation (‘Implementing the Transformation of Police Learning and Development’). During this study, digital learning emerged as one part of the learning and development puzzle and motivated the current research that this developmental paper discusses. The aim of this paper is to shed light on digital learning and discuss patterns that enable or hinder the application of digital learning in the police context. The research questions that the current study aims to answer are the following:

1. How is digital learning structures and platforms being applied within 'Learning and Development' functions in police services across England and Wales?
2. What are the enablers and barriers in the application of digital learning within ‘Learning and Development’ policing functions?

As ‘e-learning’ and digital learning are two terms used in the policing context, this study uses them interchangeably. However, e-learning is an older term than digital learning. According to the Digital Strategy of the College of Policing (CoP) ‘E-learning takes place when the user generally follows a linear path through a prescribed course answering knowledge checks tracked by a Learning Management System (LMS)’ (Osborne 2017). Digital learning, on the other hand, refers to ‘formal or informal learning via digital products and services (i.e. websites, web conferencing platforms, traditional e-learning courseware, virtual reality environments, social networks etc.)’ (Osborne 2017).

Published literature on e-learning supports the contention that e-learning systems neglect the pedagogical and organizational issues necessary for effective e-learning and mostly tends to focus on technical issues (Tynjälä & Häkkinen 2005). Additionally many applications of e-learning fail to understand the learning behaviour in an organisational and social context and do not take into account a pedagogical underpinning (Tynjälä & Häkkinen 2005). Tynjälä & Häkkinen (2005) have reviewed theories of e-learning at the workplace and suggest that in order to enhance individual and organizational learning and development e-learning solutions need certain features such as different forms of learning activities, support and guidance. Additionally, the features that Tynjälä & Häkkinen (2005) summarise are related to software design and to pedagogical and are dependent on each other. Therefore, experts of software and learning design are required to collaborate on the process of e-learning.

Further, Freund (2004) discusses that e-learning is likely to be unsuccessful when it lacks personalization, collaboration and interactivity or when it is not learner oriented. Moreover, research on e-learning in the workplace supports that e-learning might be best considered as a complement to traditional training or education rather than as a replacement (Wang 2018). Tynjälä & Häkkinen (2005) also highlight that an important element of e-learning is to share knowledge and combine it with face-to-face interactions.

In the current research, a multiple case study (Yin 2014) research design was used, with cases in 6 UK territorial police forces and the College of Policing (CoP). These studies used semi-structured interviews as a method of collecting data. 16 professionals were interviewed, across a range of L and D roles. The interviews were either face-to-face or over the phone at participants’ convenience. 2 group interviews with 2 participants each were conducted and 12 individual interviews in total. Participants were police staff, police officers and CoP staff. The job roles of these interviewees included: e-learning consultants, a digital learning producer, a digital service manager, a digital officer, trainers, the administrators of the Management Learning Environment (MLE), instructional designers, a team leader of L&D, an e-learning developer, a training manager. Policy documents related to digital learning provided background information for the current study.

The first research question explored ‘how is digital learning structures and platforms being applied within ‘Learning and Development’ functions in police services across England and Wales?’ The study did not look at particular digital courses but explored the e-learning systems (RQ1) and what enables and blocks forces in the use and application of these systems (RQ2). However, digital courses that participants mentioned involved topics such as mental health, personal safety training,

first aid training, covert human intelligence, driving, unconscious bias, public order, disclosure, searching premises and missing persons.

The analysis shows that digital learning is designed and applied by different bodies in the context of policing. The national body for professional development that designs and offers digital learning is the CoP on the MLE. CoP offers national digital learning packages to all 43 police forces. The police forces are also offering digital learning packages focusing on local learning needs of the individual forces. These packages are offered either through the MLE of the CoP in a separate domain from the national learning packages or police forces have their own learning platforms. Finally, a police force may happen to outsource the development of digital learning to external companies. According to some interviewees, there are more local digital learning packages than national ones as learning needs might be localised. Additionally, e-learning is used both for new recruits as well as for workforce already working in the police forces. Interviewees of most forces use the national learning platform while two used their own platform. Around 330.000 users are registered on the platform of the CoP.

Analysis also shows that the CoP and the Police forces do not always have the same strategy on structuring the process and the decisions that will lead to designing digital learning with the CoP having a more concrete process which involves running training needs analysis before creating digital learning as well as involving a number of experts (i.e. instructional and graphic designers, user experience and Subject Matter Experts and software developers). Only two of the police forces studied were identified to have had similar processes and were the ones that use their own platforms and are independent of the MLE of the CoP.

Further, participants in all forces reported that they occasionally share knowledge with other forces in terms of their digital learning practices. For instance, participants of one force mentioned that they organise regular events to share good practices and ideas, while in another instance, participants of another force mentioned that they collaborate with other forces as there is no guidance from elsewhere without though referring directly to the CoP. Additionally, some participants mentioned the existence of the Police OnLine Knowledge Area (POLKA), a space for sharing knowledge but this was not mentioned to be extensively used.

Turning now to the second research question, this explored ‘what are the enablers and barriers in the application of digital learning within ‘Learning and Development’ policing functions? Interviewees reported enablers of digital learning that involved diverse topics. One of them is that digital learning is considered useful to masses of professionals. Participants mentioned that digital learning contributes to fewer abstractions of officers while offering flexibility that fits busy officers working on shifts. Additionally, e-learning packages have been used from a couple of forces in combination with face-to-face learning to ensure that learners have basic skills before attending a face-to-face learning setting. Some participants mentioned that digital learning changed the delivery mechanism of learning while most participants highlighted that digital learning reduces the cost of providing training.

Interviewees also reported a number of challenging aspects of digital learning. These related to technical issues of the MLE platform that caused loss of credibility and users’ frustration. A few

participants commented negatively on the linear learning and the obsolete course structure. Almost all participants reported that digital learning is used as a way of ‘ticking boxes’ rather than to check knowledge. In particular, they mentioned that most of the digital learning packages do not involve assessment. They also discussed that the MLE platform currently used in most of the police forces is not user-friendly (i.e. not interactive) while no dedicated time is given for it. This means that the workforce may be required complete courses at their own time. A few participants made it clear that some digital learning packages are not fit for purpose or engaging, too long and generic. Participants also indicated that the platform does not offer guidance and support from a teacher. They also mentioned that digital learning is not always accessible due to technological infrastructure issues. In terms of pedagogical features, interviewees mentioned that most learning packages do not take into account the aims and learning objectives of what needs to be learned and how learners are supported to achieve objectives.

This research shows that digital learning is seen as an efficiency saving mechanism. However for digital learning to be effective where workforce acquires new skills, it needs appropriate dedication and infrastructure related to online pedagogy which supports learners. Currently, there is a lack of investment and digital learning is seen as an easy fix. However, existing research shows that digital learning involves a number of aspects that need to be taken into account which relate to technology but most importantly to learning design. Ultimately, technology does not replace human support. Therefore, this paper adds to understanding digital learning in professional development settings that are not only limited to the police context and can be used in other workplace contexts that use digital learning to upskill workforce.

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